

**COMMUNITY PROFILE:** *Running a garden centre no easy task, but one local family is up to the task*



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

The Moncada family, owners of Sicilia Gardens, enjoys the closeness of a family business. Here, from left, are Santo Moncada and his wife Lina, their son John, daughter-in-law Daniela, and son Corrado.

# Family business blossoms

Moncada family has run Sicilia Gardens for 27 years

BY JOAN RANSBERRY  
Staff Writer

If flowers make the earth smile, Stouffville must be grinning from ear to ear.

Creating a healthy and colourful spring garden is well within reach since there's no shortage of nurseries, garden stock or professional advice in the area.

One favourite garden spot is Sicilia Gardens on 10th Line — a hands-on, family-owned, well-stocked garden centre. More than 20 greenhouses are spread over two acres, making it one of the largest centres around.

Owned by the Moncada family of Stouffville, and now managed by John Moncada, Sicilia Gardens caters to corporate clients, to the experienced gardener and to the novice green thumb.

The customer base at this garden centre, however, is predominately women in their 50s.

"We cater to the baby boomers. The baby boomers take more interest in gardening than do younger women," said John Moncada, 26.

"Baby boomers see gardening as the best hobby in the world. Women born during and just after the war have the time, the money and the interest in gardening."

While the women buy, the men browse. "We added the patio and garden stone work and the water garden accessories. It worked. This seems to interest the men," John said.

Sicilia Gardens is, indeed, an all-season operation. While the business stocks perennials, the main focus is on annuals. New annuals are introduced every year, John stressed. "We've got lots of variety."

After all, serious gardeners keep up with what's new. "They learn the trends. As well, they continue to appreciate the traditional plants, shrubs, flowers and trees," John said. Because of this, the blue spruce tree, the rose, the peonies and the gladiolas will never get out of style.

Flowers, shrubs and trees are big business — Sicilia Gardens' stock is shipped to Canadian Tire, Sheridan Nurseries and to small garden centres across Ontario.

Sicilia's business is made up of 65 per cent wholesale and 35 percent retail. "Most of our retail business comes from Stouffville," John said.

Annuals live one glorious season and may be planted as specimens, in groups or in masses. Of all the flowers sold, impatiens and geraniums remain Stouffville favourites. As well, hanging baskets are popular.

and flower business for a few years. The family found its way to Stouffville in 1972 when a need for airport land prompted the federal government to expropriate the garden centre property.

Today, Santo and his wife still lend a hand, but the business reigns have been handed over to sons John and Corrado. Recently, John's wife Daniela decided to join the family team.

John learned the business at his father's side. And, he took a one-year greenhouse course at Humber College.

The brothers work in advisory capacities, answering customers' questions and helping them create their gardens. "We offer friendly expert advice and I think that's appreciated," John said.

When a customer seeks advice, John takes paper and pen in hand and helps them design a garden on a piece of paper.

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"We walk around the place. I make suggestions on what might be suitable. I remind the customer that since some plants grow taller than others, they need to place the taller ones at the back. Choosing what to plant depends on shade or how much full sun there is and on the availability of water."

The condition of the soil is also critical. "The garden starts with the soil. A triple mix is good. It's made up of top soil, peat loam and manure," John said.

The first-time gardener might consider planting begonias, petunias, marigolds and the portulacas with some dracaenas for greenery, John suggested. Meanwhile, popular flowering shrubs are dogwood and sand cherries.

This spring's proven winners are bacopa, bigens, osetosermum, lobelia, scaevola, verben, pink wave, purple wave and margarita daisy.

The biggest mistake a gardener can make is to plant too early. "Frost kills. Also, frequent watering is important. But, try to keep water off the foliage at least for a while. Also, pull the weeds. The weeds rob nutrients in the soil."

Another planting tip is to dig a couple of holes and fill them with water. While you're digging the next batch of holes, the previous ones will have drained, and you can plant in saturated soil. This will help prevent roots from drying out in the weeks ahead.

While the gardener has to deal with soil and water issues, the Moncadas are always mindful of disease. "Every year, there seems to be a new disease," John said. "For instance, if the topso virus hits one plant and within a week it can kill every plant we have."

Xanthamons is one disease that discriminates striking only geraniums. "If we get it, every single geranium will be dead very soon," John said.

In the gardening world, pests such as white flies, spider mites and thrips are more than a nuisance. "They chew away at the leaves and they breed like crazy. It can be tough going. It can be a mess," John said.

Contrary to what many think, a garden centre is not a seasonal business. The work starts in November and carries on almost year round. While there are peak times, Sicilia Gardens needs attention 12 months a year.

A garden centre cannot be opened on a shoe string budget. A new greenhouse, measuring 30 feet by 150 feet, will cost about \$175,000.

Owing a complete garden centre is expensive; it's hard work and for the Moncadas, it's a way of life.

## Farming is in our blood. Plants are our nature.

For the past 100-plus years, every baby born in the Moncada family arrived with a green thumb.

"Growing runs in the family," Santo Moncada said. "Farming is in our blood. Plants are our nature."

At home in Italy, Santo's father, grandfather and great grandfather were farmers. "They grew the grapes for the wine. There were no flowers in Italy," Santo said.

In March 1957, Santo, his young wife Lina and their four-year-old son Joe left Sicily to embark on a new life far, far away. Two weeks later, their ship docked in New York. "We then made our way to Canada," Santo said.

Days after the Moncadas arrived in Toronto, Santo landed a job with a demolition company. It was heavy, hard and dirty work. "I'd come home at night and I'd be so tired," Santo said.

"Finally, I told my wife I had to get a piece of land and grow vegetables. I knew nothing about flowers then. But, I learned."

The senior Moncada opened his first garden centre on Hwy. 7 in 1964 and operated a vegetable

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